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Who lost Ethiopia? The unmaking of an African anchor state and U.S. foreign policy

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ABSTRACT

In November 2020, Ethiopia descended into full-scale civil war which, owing to mass atrocities and regional intervention, metastasized into among the most acute humanitarian emergencies in the world. The violent fragmentation of state authority tarnished Ethiopia's internationally sanctioned role as regional peacekeeper and developmental leader—an “anchor state” of the Pax Americana in the Horn of Africa. While acknowledging the complex, multi-dimensional origins of the conflict, this article examines how efforts by the U.S. government to reinvent the strategic relationship during the 2018–2020 political transition in Addis Ababa helped pave the road to war. We argue that U.S. policymakers provided largely unconditional support to Ethiopia's new Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, creating problems of moral hazard that encouraged confrontation between rival political forces. The story of U.S. engagement in Ethiopia in this period illustrates the perils of Washington's efforts to rebalance fraught relations with its most important regional anchors.

KEYWORDS U.S. foreign policy; Africa; diplomatic history; democracy promotion; Ethiopia

By late 2021 Ethiopia had descended into one of the world's most severe humanitarian crises. Famine stalked the land, millions were displaced inside and outside the country's borders, and tens of thousands of Ethiopians had been murdered. The Ethiopian government and allied forces from neighboring Eritrea continued to struggle with quashing an insurgency begun a year earlier by the once dominant faction of the ruling party, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). But the problem went far beyond this particularly grim conflict: Federal authorities had lost their monopoly on violence, which was being perpetrated across Ethiopia by a range of actors, from local militias and ethnic “self-defense” units to pogroms against beleaguered minorities by score-settling citizens. Regional state governments were fighting each other over borders and political influence at

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both sub-national and national levels; across the territory, rival groups were arming—a deadly competition triggering security dilemmas which the Federal government was too impotent, or unwilling, to resolve. Claims of ethnic cleansing or even genocide proliferated as grievances and fears multiplied, which strengthened ethno-nationalist radicalism and calls for “homeland defense” or secession (Ademe, 2022; Hassen, 2022; Yetena, 2022). The withering of state authority made growing numbers of Ethiopians wonder whether Ethiopia could survive and, if it did, at what human cost.

The crisis represented a major reversal for Africa’s second largest country. Between 1991 and 2018, the ruling Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) had transformed this country of 110 million inhabitants, achieving major gains in economic development and significant reductions in maternal mortality, illiteracy, and HIV infections. The case for optimism was reinforced by the selection of Abiy Ahmed as Ethiopian Prime Minister in March 2018, and the sweeping political and economic transition he inaugurated. A major critique of the EPRDF party-state had been its model of “illiberal state-building” (Jones et al., 2013), which by 2018 was internally increasingly dysfunctional and a source of widespread popular discontent.¹ When the new premier initiated reforms early in his tenure, including the release of political prisoners and the legalization of previously outlawed political parties, many Ethiopians and Western diplomats were ecstatic. Other radical departures, such as Abiy’s promised economic liberalization drive, commitment to free and fair elections, and rapprochement with Eritrean President Issayas Afwerki, drew similar reactions. “Abiymania” infused much of the popular narrative at this time, with Western newspapers publishing op-eds by Abiy or in praise of Abiy just about every month. In October 2019, the internationally feted Prime Minister was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

This article asks two basic questions about Ethiopia’s rapid transition from a seeming African success story to violent fragmentation. First, while the origins of Ethiopia’s crisis were surely multi-dimensional, what role did the policies of the United States—the most powerful of Ethiopia’s external partners—play in its genesis? Second, if U.S. policy was indeed a factor in Ethiopia’s crisis, why did the United States pursue the policies that it did? Such questions are of significant real-world importance, and not just for Ethiopians. Starting during the Cold War and again in the last twenty years, Washington relied on Ethiopia as an “anchor state,” pivotal for regional order and the guaranteeing of Western interests in the Horn of Africa and Red Sea. This meant Ethiopia received prioritized U.S. engagement across a variety of sectors—diplomacy, security, and development—in the expectation that it would serve as a force multiplier in the pursuit of Washington’s regional objectives. But in recent years, Ethiopia’s growing inability to be a regional anchor and to guarantee the basic rights

and security of its citizens damaged the long-standing U.S.-Ethiopia partnership. The dazzling downward spiral undermined key U.S. and European interests in regional security, migration, health, and economic development. In the words of a former U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs: “Ethiopia has gone from being a net exporter of stability and hope to exporting instability and fear to the big strategic region surrounding it” (Interview #1, May 7, 2021). By the Spring of 2021, Washington would sever security ties with Addis, downgrade development cooperation and trade ties, and place visa restrictions on Ethiopian officials. These moves were met with an escalating campaign of anti-US rhetoric from Ethiopian authorities and their network of partisans—the once so successful partnership appeared to have been rendered moribund. To ask “Who Lost Ethiopia” is therefore to explore one of the most consequential strategic debacles U.S. foreign policy in Africa has experienced in a generation.

Like rancorous post-mortems in Washington in the early 1950s over “Who Lost China” following the Maoist triumph over the nationalist (U.S.-backed) Guomindang government, the story of how U.S. foreign policy contributed to the Ethiopian crisis is also theoretically intriguing. Beginning after World War II and continuing after 1989, the United States has pursued its core global objectives of security and prosperity by working through regional anchor states: Israel, Iran (before 1979), and Saudi Arabia in the Middle East; Ethiopia in the Horn; Japan in East Asia; etc. Yet the costs incurred through these often tumultuous partnerships have generated debates about how policy choices and ideological frames of self-professed liberal hegemons might undercut democracy, human rights, and state-building in partner countries, despite the stated commitment of Washington and its European allies to further these objectives globally. At the center of this discussion sits political conditionality and diplomatic push-back, and U.S. policymakers *routinized* and *institutionalized* inability to draw or enforce red lines around the behavior of strategic allies, particularly when this could complicate national security priorities.²

We argue that this familiar storyline in U.S. foreign policy generally applies to the Ethiopian crisis, but with some important wrinkles. First, although the country’s predicament was driven by multiple factors, the ways in which external actors, and especially the United States, engaged with the new government of Abiy Ahmed decisively catalyzed domestic tensions. Instead of pursuing a careful approach that sought to place guardrails on the transition, particularly through the promotion of national consensus and a transitional roadmap, Washington effectively underwrote Abiy’s regime consolidation project through unconditional political support. The effect was to create massive problems of “moral hazard”—excessively risky policies by Abiy on the understanding that the United States backed him to the hilt.

Second, this failure to impose guardrails was not a continuation of the well-institutionalized pathologies of Washington's long-standing diplomacy towards a critical anchor state. Rather, it was reaction to it. The optics of close strategic cooperation masked chronic tensions between Washington and Addis across multiple domains—the EPRDF's relationship with China, regional security matters, and domestic governance. To the Trump Administration and other actors across Washington's foreign policy ecosystem, Abiy's reform project embodied the solution to these historic tensions and the frustrating inability to bring the EPRDF party-state into line—a "once in-a-generation opportunity" to rebalance the U.S.-Ethiopia relationship in a manner that better suited U.S. interests. Yet in seeking to seize the moment and place a fraught strategic partnership on a firmer basis, Washington would misread core political realities in Ethiopia and the wider region and score an own goal of massive proportions.

We begin this article by dissecting extant scholarship on the U.S. approach to international order, regional anchors, and the challenges for U.S. foreign policy of managing moral hazard in these contexts. Subsequently, we put U.S.-Ethiopia relations in historical perspective, detailing the ways in which Ethiopia has been central to Washington's strategy in the Horn of Africa and Red Sea, but also a partner with divergent preferences and normative understandings regarding political order. Against this backdrop, we demonstrate why Abiy's "reform" project was perceived in Washington as the ideal vehicle for rebalancing U.S.-Ethiopia relations and a broader new approach to regional and global competition. This assumption led Western actors to unwittingly underwrite the swift personalization of power in the Prime Minister's hands, with devastating consequences.

Beyond the article's contributions to the literature on U.S. foreign policy, its regional anchors, and the inherent pathologies of those relationships, this article seeks to offer one of the most robust treatments of the international origins of the Ethiopian crisis to date. The analysis is based on an array of sources, including dozens of interviews with officials in the U.S. State Department, Department of Defense, USAID, U.S. intelligence community, protagonists from European and Middle Eastern states, and members of the Ethiopian elite. In order to encourage candor, we have maintained the anonymity of these sources. Our pool includes more than 60 (current or former) ambassadors, corporate executives, desk officers, government ministers, military officials, party cadres, rebel leaders, royals, and special envoys. Background research for this article was conducted over a period of a decade prior by both authors; conversations regarding the international politics of Ethiopia's transition were conducted right through the April 2018–November 2020 transition period, and throughout 2021, in Ethiopia, the United States, select European and Middle Eastern locations as well as virtually. Interviewees were carefully selected in function of their formal roles,

informal influence, and established “presence in the room” at key junctures. Indeed, claims made in this article are consistently based on at least two sources testifying to their accuracy, independent of one another (i.e., not belonging to the same ministry/agency and, where appropriate and possible, not working for the same organization/government). Moreover, such claims were triangulated with other available primary and secondary data to further enhance the robustness of the article’s main contentions.

U.S. foreign policy, regional anchors, and the problem of moral hazard

Since 1945, the United States has pursued its national security interests through projecting diplomatic, economic, and military power globally. In an era of international relations where formal empire has been eschewed, Washington anchored its post-war dominance through nearly 100 treaty engagements and security commitments vis-à-vis overseas partners, a cardinal principle of U.S. foreign policy that, despite much criticism, retains its importance until the present day (Beckley, 2015; Campbell, 2004). Such alliances facilitate the effective pursuit of the superpower’s objectives and render the projection of its power more legitimate; in doing so, they evince what theoreticians of a liberal international order believe sets (consensual) hegemony apart from (iron-fisted, material) primacy in international relations (Clark, 2011). Indeed, defenders of U.S. (liberal) hegemony argue that its network of alliances reflects a vision of global order that is intrinsically inclined to be rule-bound, predictable and peace building, contrasting with unbridled (illiberal) imperialist conquests of previous eras in world history (Deudney & Ikenberry, 1999). For its advocates, the enduring dividends of liberal hegemony are evident from the fact that neither Western democracies nor authoritarian partners of the United States in the developing world broke with Washington after 1989, when (Neo-)Realists predicted that the end of the Cold War would cause alliances to fray in the absence of the Soviet threat and would lead states like Germany, Japan, or Turkey to balance against U.S. unipolar dominance (Lebow, 1994; Mousseau, 2019).

For both instrumental and normative reasons then, U.S. liberal hegemony and its underlying various regional orders have entailed cultivating “anchors” in strategic regions of the globe and building deep, multi-issue relationships with them. Although Washington has for pragmatic reasons not formulated a singular definition or exhaustive list of anchor states, U.S. foreign policy discourse has for decades, sometimes implicitly and sometimes explicitly, relied on the concept to, following Tuathail and Agnew (1992), “‘spatialize’ international politics in such a way as to represent it as a ‘world’ characterized by particular types of places, peoples and dramas” (p. 192). The notion of regional anchorage—which evokes the

image of a select fellowship of states that share enduring strategic interests that bind them to Washington and that help keep American assets and influence safe—is central to how the imaginary of U.S. liberal hegemony is operationalized. If America is a global power with interests across continents and oceans yet cannot pay equal attention to every member of the international system at the same time, then identifying regional “anchors” allows it to remain engaged in various regions and to decentralize, through key allies, the provision of public goods such as security. These anchors help Washington pursue its objectives more effectively in complex and hard-to-penetrate regions of the world and, conversely, their status as America’s designated partners helps “anchor” such crucial states in the U.S.’ geopolitical orbit (Cha, 2017). Moreover, the concept is compatible not only with liberal vistas of hegemony premised on deep cooperation and shared norms between likeminded units (Goh, 2013). It also easily fits a more Realist interpretation of international order based on perceptions of threats and opportunities shared between the hegemon and its regional allies.

An extensive literature studies the Pacific World by virtue of its various anchors assisting U.S. foreign policy and China’s challenge to this architecture (Liu, 2020). Australia, for instance, has for decades served as America’s “Southern anchor” in protecting its security interests and helping push trade liberalization (Carr, 2021). In East Asia, Washington’s “hub and spokes” alliance network was critical to the containment of communism and the deepening of economic globalization. The special relationship with Japan, anchored in the U.S.-Japan security treaty, is perhaps the clearest example of America’s regional anchors strategy. It has successfully weathered domestic storms (cf. protests over U.S. bases on Japanese soil in the 2000s or the disgruntlement of America’s car industry vis-à-vis Japanese export surges in the 1980s) and at times sharply contrasting views on how to tackle North Korea’s nuclear program or deal with China’s (re-)emergence (Ikenberry & Inoguchi, 2003; Komine, 2016). Such mustering of requisite mutual pragmatism to manage tensions and disagreements has been evident too in Washington’s dealings with Middle Eastern anchors, including Saudi Arabia, Iran (before 1979) Egypt (after 1978), and Israel which have been bulwarks for limiting Soviet influence, securing the free flow of oil to global markets, and aiding US counter-terrorism efforts. While intelligence and defense are at the heart of such relationships, interactions between Washington and its anchors are deliberately broadened to other realms—cultural exchange, education, procurement, food aid—to put the partnership on a firm footing through cultivating numerous constituencies.³

An important dimension of scholarly and popular discourse on the relationship between the United States and its allies pertains to its effects on the political choices of the latter. One particular problematic is the

principal-agent, or patron-client dilemma, in which preference divergence between the United States and its regional agents drives the latter to engage in domestic or foreign policy conduct that the U.S. government views as undesirable (Ladwig, 2017; Milo et al., 2016). Historically, this includes corruption, repression of dissent, or nationalist sable-rattling that cuts against Washington's stated liberal internationalism and its constituencies in the United States.⁴ When confronted with this predicament, U.S. policymakers have faced a choice: to push back through political conditionalities or ignore the dissonance and avoid taking serious action altogether. The pursuit of the second option by the United States (and other Western allies) can have a ratchet effect on the conduct of ruling elites in partner countries, further stunting democratic governance and human rights, and fueling yet more state violence (Simpson, 2008; Trisko Darden, 2019). This conduct, in turn, can also lead to armed resistance from the domestic opponents of allied regimes. At the ideational level, principal-agent glitches thereby undermine US claims to a uniquely legitimate approach to international order and genuine concern for liberal values, as critics often regard abrasive behavior by U.S. allies-cum-clients as reflective of Washington's hypocrisy in talking about human rights and democracy but de facto condoning authoritarianism and illiberalism (Robinson, 1996). Although there are variety of causal logics at work, the problem is often one of *moral hazard*: Reliable external support "serves as a form of insurance" that incentivizes incumbent leaders in U.S. partner countries to deploy more aggressive and destabilizing strategies of power consolidation than they otherwise would (Boutton, 2019).

This quandary of moral hazard underscores a key puzzle. In the face of "bad" behavior from their regional partners, what explains the inability of U.S. policymakers to push back through conditionalities and diplomatic pressure? Levitsky and Way (2006) propose that "Western leverage may be limited by competing foreign policy objectives" and that "strategically unimportant states" have been those most likely to bear the brunt of Western pressure. Well-researched historical accounts of vital U.S. bilateral alliances describe this reality and its resulting pathologies in relations with Egypt, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia, to name but a few (Brownlee, 2012; Haqqani, 2013; McFarland, 2020; Vitalis, 2009). These works demonstrate that Washington's politics of enablement vis-à-vis its regional anchors, and the consequent moral hazards it has produced, are deeply structural: that is, embedded in enduring understandings of strategic interest, as well as institutions and established patterns of interaction, that persist throughout time across multiple administrations and geopolitical eras. In this sense, the pathologies of America's regional alliances in 1980 are not much different from those today.

U.S.-Ethiopia relations in many ways reflect the intuitions of this body of scholarship. Although the U.S.-Ethiopia alliance has mostly eschewed formal treaty commitments (the 1953 Mutual Defense Assistance Agreement being a notable exception), it has been historically robust and vital to U.S. strategic interests in Africa and the Middle East. While having security cooperation as the centerpiece (Baissa, 1989; Lyons, 1986), it has been broad based in its prioritization of aviation development (the nurturing of Ethiopian Airlines as the country's only world-class company), food aid, HIV treatment, and educational cooperation in ways that have been unavailable to other African states (excluding Egypt). Ethiopia is Washington's second oldest diplomatic relationship in Africa; as host nation of the African Union, it has been a vital conduit for American diplomatic influence across the continent for decades; the two countries were aligned against the Axis powers during World War II; and for the first half of the Cold War, Ethiopia was considered a bedrock of Washington's containment strategy of communism and Pan-Arabism in the Horn of Africa. Ethiopia's Marxist turn in the mid-1970s weakened relations, but diplomatic ties were retained throughout—not least because state-owned Ethiopian Airlines remained Boeing's key client on the continent. After 1991, the old partnership was rebuilt and taken to new heights, particularly after September 11, 2001 when Addis emerged as the lynchpin of Washington's counter-terrorism ambitions in the region (Metaferia, 2009). The U.S. National Security Strategy of 2002 underlined that Ethiopia was one of four African countries that would serve as “anchors for regional engagement” (U.S. National Security Strategy, 2002).

The importance of Ethiopia to U.S. security and regional stability objectives have meant that its human rights record, its overbearing attitude vis-à-vis neighbors and its reluctance to adopt neoliberal reforms have been frequently overlooked, as long as governments in Addis were willing to lead in confronting socialist and Islamist enemies and help safeguard Western regional interests (Le Gouriellec, 2018). Under the aegis of the Global War on Terror (GWOT), Ethiopian troops have since 2006–2007 battled the jihadist Al-Shabab in Somalia and in 2017, Ethiopia became the world's top supplier of UN peacekeepers, deploying more forces than any other country on perilous missions. In recognition of its hosting of hundreds of thousands of refugees and of its spearheading of initiatives to bring peace in and between Somalia, Sudan and South Sudan through the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), Ethiopia received soaring levels of official development assistance—US\$3 billion in 2011, rising to circa US\$5 billion in 2020. In the last decade, only Israel, Afghanistan, Jordan, and Egypt have received more aid from the United States than Ethiopia. Its developmental progress since 2000 rendered it a donor darling, though one adamant about guarding its sovereignty (Feyissa, 2011).

Throughout this history of intimate collaboration, elites in Addis regularly pursued policies that Washington considered ill-advised and dangerous. In the 1960s and 1970s, Haile Selassie's unilateral annexation of Eritrea, attempts to acquire destabilizing military technologies, and failures to implement reforms that could forestall growing sympathies for socialist solutions to crippling poverty and inequality, alarmed US policymakers and would eventually prove fatal for the imperial regime. Yet an invaluable signals facility at Asmara's Kagnev Station (generating vital intelligence on developments in the Middle East and Western Indian Ocean) and the U.S.' single-minded preoccupation with containing Communism, precluded any serious effort to get tough with the Ethiopian monarchy (Lefebvre, 1992). In the mid-2000s, the United States was similarly unable to meaningfully change the parameters of the relationship in light of the EPRDF's violent 2005 post-election crackdown, its scorched earth counter-insurgency in the Ogaden, and its refusal to abide by the terms of the Algiers Agreement with Eritrea. Here again, the US had other equities at stake: Namely, a desire to preserve its intelligence cooperation with Ethiopian authorities in the context of the GWOT, especially efforts to target Islamists in neighboring Somalia (Odinga, 2017).

Set against this backdrop, the conceptual stakes of assessing Washington's role in Ethiopia's unraveling are considerable. In demonstrating that U.S. policy toward Abiy Ahmed's government created dangerous problems of moral hazard that destabilized Ethiopia, we confirm established intuitions found in the theoretical literature. But we argue an important conceptual departure as well: it would be a mistake to draw a straight line between the errors of U.S. engagement with Abiy, and the pathologies of earlier eras of U.S.-Ethiopia relations. Rather than a reflection of the established practices of decades, Washington's failure to draw red lines with the new regime flowed from a different impulse altogether—a desire to break with the past, place Ethiopia's role as anchor on a more solid footing and align it with US objectives globally and in the Greater Middle East. In effect, the story of how Washington lost Ethiopia is not one of continuity, but of change.

The fraught U.S.-Ethiopia partnership

The *sine qua non* of U.S.-Ethiopia partnership in the years after September 11, 2001 was security cooperation. But even in this realm collaboration was charged. Ethiopia's expanding cooperation with China and the sense of a geopolitical shift toward Beijing were increasingly salient concerns but embedded in broader divergences between United States and Ethiopian decisionmakers. American ambassadors in Addis have continuously pushed for intimate engagement with Ethiopia's political and security elite, seeking to

broaden training and study opportunities for senior officers and provide military equipment. Such initiatives served many purposes, including more fully institutionalizing the counter-terrorism cooperation that was so central to Washington's goals in Somalia. However, such overtures seldom made in-roads; the deep-seated distrust of the assertively sovereign and Marxist-Leninist inspired EPRDF meant that many such opportunities were only partly taken up, or outright refused. This bewildered U.S. officials who underscored that other African states were not offered such generous invitations and that Ethiopia could not complain about insufficient US assistance for its regional role yet rebuff concrete offers. According to one former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Africa, "They wanted our help, on terrorism for instance, but it was so difficult to give it to them. They were always willing to cut off their nose to spite their face ... We're always doing something that annoys them" (Interview #2, May 10, 2021). A case in point was the drone base in Arba Minch, Southern Ethiopia, which the United States operated for years to strike targets in Somalia; to the Pentagon's astonishment, Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF) Chief of Staff Samora Yunus asked to close it after repeated insistence by US officials that Ethiopian counterparts undergo human rights training. In another sequence of incidents, Samora rebuffed United States concerns about Ethiopia's arms relationship with North Korea, going so far as to veto the U.S. Ambassador's visit to a Pyongyang-supported munitions factory in Ambo (Yamamoto, 2008). From Washington's perspective, Samora's behavior was inexplicable (the proposed training, for instance, was essentially pro forma and the base enabled U.S.-Ethiopian operations against Al-Shabab) but not so for the EPRDF: From the party-state's perspective, it was about reminding Washington that the bilateral partnership was between sovereign equals, asserting Addis Ababa's ability to autonomously make national security decisions and signaling that the United States needed Ethiopia as much as the other way around (Interview #3, April 19, 2016; Interview #4, April 12, 2017; Interview #5, November 1, 2018; Interview #6, March 23, 2018; Interview #7, April 27, 2021).

Washington's concerns about uneven security cooperation were compounded by contentious issues of governance. Between a historic 2015 visit by President Obama to Ethiopia—the first by a sitting U.S. president—and Abiy's election, U.S. officials fretted increasingly about the EPRDF's inability to accommodate escalating protests across Oromia. Since 2014, thousands of Oromo citizens had taken to the streets and in some cases attacked state and investor property to challenge what they saw as a government perpetuating their historical marginalization in Ethiopian society (Záhořík, 2017). Triggered by the Addis Ababa Master Plan that intended to systematize the expansion of the capital and provide new infrastructure and services, the protests quickly became a denunciation of the EPRDF

state-building model, the violence it unleashed against its opponents and the ways in which it unfairly created winners and losers (Olana Wayessa Anja Nygren, 2016). When three years of EPRDF repression (including detaining perhaps 50,000 citizens) combined with promises to address unemployment and land disputes failed to douse the flames, Western diplomats—along with much of Addis Ababa’s population—became gripped with fears over Ethiopia’s stability. The protests not only catalyzed a wider revival of ethno-regional grievances and radicalism but threatened to cut off supplies into the capital and render the country ungovernable. Internal paralysis was also affecting Ethiopia’s ability to project regional leadership, especially in South Sudan and Somalia, and to capitalize on the 2015 breakthrough in the Nile Basin negotiations with Cairo and Khartoum. Dialogue between Western officials and their EPRDF interlocutors about political reform, always a feature of the diplomatic dance between the two sides, became increasingly frank throughout 2017 (Interview #8, January 11, 2019). Back in Washington, Ethiopian diaspora mobilization had prompted both the US House and Senate to table resolutions condemning the EPRDF’s human rights record and urging the executive branch to recalibrate the relationship.

Amid the crisis, EPRDF Central Committee conclaves throughout 2016 and 2017 failed to produce a decisive response, until the marathon deliberation of February–March 2018 resulted in the ascendancy of the candidate of the Oromo People’s Democratic Organisation (OPDO), Abiy Ahmed, to the EPRDF chairmanship. Ethiopia’s new leader was an unknown quantity to Western diplomats, but his ethnic identity was encouraging. As one of the State Department’s most senior officials explained, “Because of all the protests and the growing anarchy, there was an expectation that whoever came next had to be an Oromo ... Some said only an Oromo could save ethnic federalism and return Ethiopia to stability” (Interview #9, June 24, 2021).

The peaceful transfer of authority, even within the same party, led to a sigh of relief. The new Prime Minister lost no time in stamping his authority on the country (Fisher & Meressa Tsehay, 2019). Just in his first months, Abiy released political prisoners and decriminalized armed opposition groups, replaced reviled regional potentates, and worked to heal the twenty-six yearlong schism within the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (Haustein & Østebø, 2011)—a symbol of Ethiopianness, even for non-Orthodox citizens. Abiy toured all regions of Ethiopia, where he was often met by large crowds, and preached his message of *Medemer* (peacefully coming together). Changes were decreed at a frantic pace, and Western interlocutors could not stop gushing: “Abiy was a disruptor and we liked that ... He was changing everything, all the time. It was a period of mania.

Ethiopians could not keep up, we could not keep up.” (Interview #10, June 30, 2021)

Ethiopia’s ideological shift

The United States spearheaded the embrace of the new leader. His message of reform impressed many in Washington; like the Ethiopian public, U.S. officials were charmed by Abiy’s youth, rhetoric and popular touch. “Some people at the embassy called him an Ethiopian JFK. He looked good—and nothing like an EPRDF Central Committee securocrat. He clearly loved America. We felt that would allow us to connect” (Interview #11, April 7, 2021). After the frustrations of the “underperforming” US-Ethiopia partnership here, it seemed, was a unique chance to deepen the relationship. US staff on the ground took the lead in endorsing Abiy wholeheartedly and selling the policy to the most influential people in the Trump Administration, who generally regarded Africa as a low priority. Dixit one of U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo’s right-hands:

Ambassador [Michael] Raynor [U.S. Ambassador to Ethiopia] immediately moved to support the transition. That was brave, he took a lot of initiative ... He never waited for Washington to make statements, signal his support, help him [Abiy] get access to the administration. We knew that was crucial to help make possible fundamental changes in the party and in the country. (Interview #12, June 16, 2021)

Those “fundamental changes” referred to Abiy’s apparent agenda of political liberalization, but above all to a major ideological and strategic shift that, from a US standpoint, would bolster Ethiopia’s role as a regional anchor: pulling the country away from Beijing’s orbit. As highlighted by the former heads of mission to Addis Ababa interviewed for this article, every U.S. ambassador from Clinton to Trump saw China’s influence in Ethiopia deepen further—a factor which many of them identified as one of the reasons for the “unfulfilled potential” of the U.S.-Ethiopia relationship. No country imported more from Ethiopia than China and bilateral trade quintupled to circa US\$5 billion in the last decade. While Western investors were kept out of Ethiopia’s politically sensitive telecoms sector, Chinese assistance and technology was enthusiastically invited in. And Ethiopian Airlines turned Bole International Airport into Africa’s main hub for connections with China—going as far as offering fully Mandarin signage. From the standpoint of U.S. officials, Sino-Ethiopian mercantile partnerships (Adem, 2012) were not even the main threat: it was the strong party-to-party ties between the EPRDF and CCP that really worried them. After the traumatic 2005 elections, it was the CCP that advised Meles Zenawi to recruit millions of new members to give the party ears and eyes in every neighborhood of every

Ethiopian town and village (Interview #13, March 23, 2014). The TPLF—the EPRDF’s historically dominant wing—leaned heavily on Chinese advice for the political education of cadres and civil servants and for its conceptions of an Ethiopian developmental state (Verhoeven, 2020). The centrality of big infrastructure (especially dams and railways); the industrial parks and social housing schemes; the use of financial repression to fund an activist state and other hallmarks of Ethiopia’s growth strategy were all Chinese influenced (Fourie, 2015). The political economy of EPRDF state-building—its revolutionary democracy, its illiberal dirigisme and its choice for Asian states as developmental models—troubled U.S. officials because it explicitly challenged the Washington Consensus.

The discomfort over the EPRDF’s illiberal state-building and its growing embeddedness in Chinese ideas and capital had become obvious in previous years. Obama’s 2015 speech at the Chinese-constructed building of the African Union admonished Ethiopia (and other African states) for pulling dangerously close to Beijing and its rapacious practices: “economic relationships can’t simply be about building countries’ infrastructure with foreign labor or extracting Africa’s natural resources” (Obama, 2015). But the centrality of China in U.S. foreign policy was taken to an entirely different level by the Trump Administration, which strongly subscribed to the idea of a New Cold War (Westad, 2019; Zhao, 2019). In line with its broader narrative about China unfairly taking advantage of globalization and waging economic war, Trump officials believed China was ensnaring Ethiopia and other African states through debt trap diplomacy (Alden & Jiang, 2019; Lipopolis & Verhoeven, 2022), hence the quintupling of Ethiopian external liabilities (in dollar terms) between 2009 and 2019. Mike Pompeo and John Bolton linked growing indebtedness to China with Beijing demanding shifts in the foreign policy of debtor states or ownership of strategic assets (Bolton, 2018; Pompeo, 2020). Seen through Cold War lenses, what was at stake in the 2018 political transition in Addis was potentially the US-Ethiopia strategic relationship itself.

It was in this context that Abiy Ahmed emerged, vowing that Ethiopia would undergo an ideological reconversion to strengthen the partnership with Washington. Key Western officials interviewed for this article stressed the lengths to which Abiy went to present himself as “the most pro-American leader Ethiopia has ever had” (Interview #14, May 17, 2021). Having campaigned hard against the TPLF to become Prime Minister, Abiy lost no time in reinforcing suspicions about the TPLF-CCP relationship and sharing half-truths about those ties with his Western interlocutors: “We liked this of course. We wanted China to play a quieter, less ideological role” (Interview #15, April 1, 2021). Distancing Ethiopia from China included an aesthetic makeover of government offices and the city of Addis Ababa whose recent ugliness he blamed on the Chinese developmental

style; Abiy had the emblem of Ethiopia's National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS) overhauled to resemble that of the CIA and began conducting meetings from rooms that no longer exuded stuffy socialism but oozed slick corporate capitalism. More substantively, he announced his willingness to liberalize the telecoms sector, privatize Ethiopian Airlines and buy more high-quality—i.e., non-Chinese—goods. “Abiy knew exactly what he was doing with the ‘Buy American’ talk. Pompeo had said that we wanted to compete economically with the Chinese in Africa. Abiy was saying that he wanted to be the first new customer,” noted one State Department official (Interview #11, April 7, 2021). Indeed, in late 2020 Trump administration politicians at the Development Finance Corporation (DFC) greenlighted a US\$500 million loan to a Vodafone/Safaricom-led consortium that was bidding to be the first private entrant into Ethiopia's massive telecoms market. The DFC justified this move almost entirely in terms of countering China, whose firms also craved an Ethiopian telecoms license.⁵ All of these developments appeared to spell the end of the old EPRDF political economy. One UK diplomat noted that, “Abiy was getting rid of the constraints we had been talking about, for years ... What he promised looked like a terminal change ... That the ‘New Ethiopia’ could now take off economically, finally fulfilling all of its potential” (Interview #16, June 30, 2021).

For senior figures in the U.S. Republican Party, Abiy's credibility as an ideological reformer on Africa's frontlines of great power competition was bolstered by his overt religiosity. Not only did the ambience at Abiy's political rallies mimic that of Pentecostal “crusades,” in 2019 the Prime Minister dissolved the EPRDF and rechristened the ruling bloc “the Prosperity Party”, an obvious reference to his beliefs and style. Abiy played the Christian card resolutely through his connections with Oklahoma Senator James Inhofe, whose mixing of religion and politics in Africa (McGovern, 2012) had already brought him in contact with numerous Protestant Oromo politicians, such as former army Chief of Staff Abadula Gameda and (from 2016 onwards) Abiy himself, then a little-known regional figure. Inhofe emphasized to his GOP colleagues how much Ethiopia's promising novice would benefit from American guidance; Abiy's participation in prayer breakfasts—including with Vice President Mike Pence—and his disparagement of the “godless” CCP in private conversations cemented his reputation in Washington.

In addition to such informal courtship and (presumed) mentoring, the U.S. government embraced Abiy officially and unambiguously. In October 2018, U.S. Embassy Addis publicly released an Integrated Country Strategy that derisively described the old EPRDF establishment as “entrenched groups seeking to preserve the status quo of suppressed rights, limited democratic participation, and statist economic policies” and argued that Abiy's

reforms “reflect a strongly Western orientation.” The strategic stakes were thus the following:

Ethiopia’s reform agenda, if properly executed, will greatly strengthen its capacity to be a strong partner to the United States in areas of U.S. strategic priority: promoting Horn of Africa stability, countering terrorism, countering Chinese and Russian influence in the region, and promoting U.S. commercial opportunity via the fastest-growing economy in Africa. Second, our role in supporting Ethiopia’s pivot toward reform, and the resulting ascendance of Prime Minister Abiy, gives us access, influence, and good will with the Ethiopian government that is exponentially greater than it has ever been.

Our Integrated Country Strategy (ICS) is based on the Embassy’s commitment to assist Ethiopia in this transition and to capitalize on our newfound, but potentially transient, influence. This will allow Ethiopia to enhance its strong leadership role and partnership with the United States in the region and on the continent. We see a once-in-a-generation opportunity to advance U.S. national interests with a partner that newly and openly seeks to align its own national interests with ours. (Integrated Country Strategy, 2018)

Ethiopia’s new friends in the Middle East

The geopolitical lure of the “New Ethiopia” was further underscored by its rapid deepening of relations with America’s friends in the Middle East. These blossoming ties dovetailed with the Trump administration’s promotion of a new regional order built around Israel, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates that prioritized containing Iran and rolling back its influence from Lebanon to Yemen; crushing the Muslim Brotherhood; circumventing the Palestinian issue; and generating commercial opportunities for the United States (Gause, 2018). Finding ways to strengthen the Trump Administration’s key allies and shielding them from criticism for their controversial domestic and foreign policies was believed to be in the US national interest, allowing a focus on “America First” and concomitant retreat to a role of offshore balancer or “belligerent minimalism” (Lynch, 2016). Whilst many senior U.S. officials had little interest in the Horn or Ethiopia per se, to the extent that the latter could buttress Middle Eastern objectives it could certainly be useful.

For decades, Ethiopian rulers have been profoundly weary of being sucked into the snake-pit of Middle Eastern geopolitics or having to deal with the destabilizing effects of the export of Middle Eastern rivalries to the Horn of Africa, which have consistently undercut Addis’ influence in its backyard. This was the case vis-à-vis Gamal Abdel Nasser’s Pan-Arabism and Pan-Africanism—which Haile Selassie sought to counter—and vis-à-vis Saudi Arabia’s petrodollars that helped arm Mengistu’s foes in Eritrea, Somalia and Sudan during the 1980s (Erllich, 2007). Attempts at safeguarding

Ethiopia's dominance of the Horn also guided the EPRDF's anxious response to the regional polarization between Iran and the Arab Gulf states on the one hand and among Arabian Peninsula players—Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE—on the other. One of the EPRDF's frustrations in the last years of Obama and under Trump was that Washington left the Horn dealing with the fallout of America's Middle Eastern policy: Gulf rivalries in the shadow of America's waning engagement led Abu Dhabi, Ankara, Doha, Tehran and Riyadh to cultivate partnerships in Africa, a process that was turbocharged by the Saudi-Emirati intervention in the Yemen Civil War (Verhoeven, 2018). American sanctioning of the intervention was itself a function of appeasing Abu Dhabi and Riyadh in the wake of the 2015 Iranian nuclear deal and gave them leeway to project power in the Horn: While the UAE took control of the Somaliland port of Berbera, Saudis and Emiratis also sought the support of Sudan and Somalia in their efforts to isolate Iran and Yemen's Houthi rebels and launched frequent bombing raids from Eritrea, the EPRDF's nemesis which re-emerged from regional isolation. For Ethiopian strategists, Washington's preoccupation with regional order in the Middle East appeared to be facilitating the country's "encirclement by Arabs who have long tried to break up Ethiopia" (Interview #17, September 14, 2016).

Encouraged by U.S. officials, Abiy reversed decades of Ethiopian foreign policy and wooed Washington's closest allies in the Middle East. Abiy, a former intelligence agent, strengthened ties with Israel, which had long collaborated with Addis on counterterrorism but now proposed a qualitative deepening of relations, especially through closer cooperation between the National Intelligence Security Service (NISS), the Mossad, and Israel's National Cyber Directorate. Abiy's coziness with Binyamin Netanyahu's much-criticized right-wing government as it sought to expand partnerships in Africa (Gidron, 2020) was music to the ears of Trump politicians. But Ethiopia went even further with another regional heavyweight that was particularly favored by the Trump Administration: Abiy forged a remarkable understanding with Emirati Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed who in 2018 provided immediate assistance to the Ethiopian treasury—and political finance to the prime minister personally—so as to create material space for the reformist government's agenda. Abu Dhabi committed to Abiy's pet project of beautifying Addis Ababa and trained a military force, directly under the control of the prime minister: The newly formed Republican Guard was to offset the problem of the ENDF's possibly divided loyalties vis-à-vis Abiy and its former TPLF/EPRDF patrons. How the Prime Minister invited Gulf money and influence into the core of the Ethiopian state astonished some ordinary Ethiopians but was cheered on by the US government and its European partners. According to one European special envoy, "The Emiratis bailed Abiy out in his first months ... This gave him the opportunity

to make all these changes. Their assistance was also a way of pulling Ethiopia away from China” (Interview 18, July 6, 2021). Garnering sway over Ethiopia was an attractive prize in its own right but also affirmed Abu Dhabi’s usefulness to Washington: “The Emirates embraced Abiy because they thought it would put them in the good books of the West—there were economic interests too, but they thought it would help garner favors with us and our European allies” (Interview #19, July 30, 2021).

In the first months after the transition began, the United States, the UAE, and Ethiopia undertook a sensitive choreography towards Ethiopia’s rapprochement with Eritrea. The two countries had fought a bitter border war between 1998 and 2000, and the failure to implement the 2002 ruling of the Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission prevented a resolution of tensions (Müller, 2019). While the exact details remain hazy even after interviews with numerous protagonists, there can be little doubt that Issayas Afwerki and Abiy found each other quickly, each for their own self-interested reasons (Woldemariam, 2019), while allowing the UAE (and to a lesser extent Saudi Arabia) to receive some credit for the mediation. Ethiopia undertook to withdraw from the disputed areas and to ask for UN sanctions on Eritrea to be lifted, in exchange for normalized diplomatic ties and UAE financial assistance. For the Emiratis, being seen to be brokering a solution helped counter international opprobrium over its conduct of the Yemen War—airial bombardment of civilian areas, the deployment of mercenaries, partnering with Sudan’s notorious Janjaweed militias (Juneau, 2020). For the US and its European allies, this appeared to be catching multiple birds with one stone: resolving a conflict that had divided the Horn of Africa for two decades; offering the prospect of being able to send back thousands of Eritrean refugees; and a shining diplomatic success for both the Emirati friends and the new Ethiopian leader they were keen to bolster.

There was one caveat to the mutually reinforcing dynamic between the Trump administration’s Middle East strategy and efforts to bolster Abiy. The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), which Addis Ababa began filling in 2020, provoked escalating tensions between Ethiopia and Egypt that the United States, as a long-standing security partner of both, would attempt to mediate. From the beginning, the effort was compromised by Washington’s pro-Egyptian bias, driven in large measure by the understanding that Egypt was essential to the Trump administration’s ambitious plans to redraw regional geopolitics. As one senior US official recalled

Because the Middle East was so important to us, everything was done to reinforce our main partners there: Israel, first and foremost, but also the Emiratis, Saudis and Egyptians. Destabilizing Egypt would destabilize Israel and the Gulf as a whole. So the administration decided to side with Egypt. (Interview #20, June 14, 2021)

In August 2020 the U.S. government paused US\$270 million in bilateral assistance, insisting that Addis had proven insufficiently flexible in GERD negotiations.

Yet in the final analysis, these developments did not fundamentally alter the importance or the extent of Washington's support for the PM's consolidation of political power at home. Some US officials even describe the resulting approach as "schizophrenic"—pro-Egypt on the GERD and pro-Abiy in Ethiopia (Interview #14, April 17, 2021).⁶ A case can be made that that the Trump administration's handling of the Nile waters file actually bolstered US efforts to support the PM, convincing key players at the State Department and at the embassy in Addis Ababa that Washington had to compensate for the White House's pro-Egyptian line by doubling down on its embrace of Abiy's domestic policies (Interview #7, April 27, 2021; Interview #12, June 16, 2021; Interview #14, April 17, 2021, Interview #18, July 6, 2021).

Blind spots and moral hazard: Abiy's consolidation of power and state fragmentation

As discussed, Abiy's selection as Prime Minister came at an unsettling time: years of mounting political violence had exposed and amplified social and ethno-regional cleavages that the party-state had hoped would be transformed by the success of its developmentalism (Clapham, 2018). Like large swathes of the Ethiopian public, the country's international partners simultaneously hoped for a return to the stability of the status quo ante and for the tackling of these painful divisions. This tension between stability and root-and-branch reform—both of which were promised by Abiy and his closest EPRDF allies in "Team Lemma"—placed unrealistic and contradictory demands on the new government from the onset.

Crucially, Washington's tight embrace of Abiy—quickly followed by the EU and UAE—strongly incentivized the incoming elite to plot a more uncompromising course of action than would otherwise have been plausible.⁷ It is important to remember that decisive as Abiy's election by the EPRDF Council in March 2018 appeared (receiving more than 60% of cadre votes cast), this was not the sentiment inside the party, where it was more a reflection of the TPLF's unpopularity and political blundering than a mandate for specific reforms (Interview #22, March 6, 2018; Interview #23, March 30, 2018). Neither the vote itself nor the events leading up to it gave Abiy a strong grip on the party, the security services, or the bureaucracy. However, the extraordinary degree of external legitimacy that the prime minister acquired overnight and the strong financial, political and security commitments of his foreign backers altered the options available to Abiy. Especially because the TPLF's loss of hegemony was not mediated by an elite bargain with Team Lemma that recognized each faction's interests

and security fears, Abiy prioritized consolidating power and his own survival. While this was couched as “democratization,” the net result was, invariably, a strengthening of the Prime Minister’s authority and a weakening of the old party-state. For instance, Team Lemma had gained popularity by mobilizing against the state of emergency (allowing the deployment of the ENDF to quell rioting) and therefore rushed parliament to repeal it in June 2018; but the rule of law mattered clearly less when Abiy subsequently redeployed the ENDF, on questionable constitutional bases, to Oromia, the South, and the Somali region when his authority was contested. Similarly, Abiy proclaimed an amnesty for dissidents criminalized by the TPLF and reorganized the government with an unprecedented number of new ministers, including many women, to the delight of Western audiences. What such “inclusivity” veiled were reshuffles in which virtually all potential rivals to the prime minister were removed from the cabinet and replaced by novices dependent on his patronage. This is not to deny the significance of representation per se or the intrinsic value of broader attempts to liberalize Ethiopian society, but to underline their primary effects on how authority was exercised. The discourse of “democratic transition” notwithstanding, the major constant since March 2018 was the personalization of power and the deinstitutionalization of the party-state.

The Trump Administration enabled these trends by interpreting the complexities and ambivalences of Ethiopian politics through the ideological lens of great power competition with China and the prioritization of the interests of its Middle Eastern allies: above all, it chose to consistently understand intra-EPRDF power struggles as necessary confrontations between the young, pro-American leader and pro-Chinese apparatchiks of the party-state. As one senior official in the US intelligence community noted,

... so many of us saw the discordant bits of information as simply the result of his struggle with the old guard. Things were explained away as the struggles of the reformer. We refused to see it for what it was. (Interview #24, April 27, 2021)

This was the case with three enigmatic events in 2018—a grenade explosion at Abiy’s biggest ever rally, the suspicious death of the GERD director and a video-recorded incursion of special forces into palace grounds—that were all hastily attributed to saboteurs seeking to derail the reform agenda. Despite the fact that little to no evidence was offered, the U.S. embassy in Addis strongly backed the narrative of a beleaguered reformer assailed by reactionaries. This dissonance was even more apparent on June 22, 2019 when, within the space of a few hours, the head of the Amhara Regional State and the (Tigrayan) ENDF Chief of Staff were murdered. Abiy appeared in army fatigues on national television, denouncing a coup plot and asking the nation to be ready to confront its enemies; U.S. Assistant Secretary of

State for African Affairs Tibor Nagy blamed “vestiges of the old regime,” a clear reference to the TPLF, and offered total support to Abiy (Nagy, 2019). Yet, as is evident from our interviews, many officials in Washington and the U.S. embassy in Ethiopia today believe that there never was a coup plot, that the TPLF had neither reason nor opportunity to conduct these attacks and that, like the events of 2018, a politically convenient choreography was spun for the benefit of Abiy and several of his closest Amhara allies consolidating power. Independent of what transpired during these unexplained episodes, the net result was increased foreign support for the Prime Minister and a further delegitimization of his opponents. The UAE supported Republican Guard was officially created in direct response, in order to give the Prime Minister a force accountable only to him (Interview #25, October 19, 2019; Interview #26, June 28, 2021). U.S. government officials endorsed the idea.

This pattern of refusing to question the growing chasm between the promise of liberalization and the reality of concentrating power became even more painful when Abiy broke in 2019 with Lemma Megersa, his once political helmsman in the OPDO and former Minister of Defense, and Jawar Mohammed, Oromia’s most effective political organizer. The arrest of the latter in June 2020, in the wake of yet another mysterious assassination, this time of popular Oromo singer Hacaaluu Hundessa, was part of a wave of mass detentions jailing the Prime Minister’s most prominent critics. Even those who supported Abiy, as part of Team Lemma, in his initial confrontation with what they called the “immoral and arrogant” TPLF no longer denied the naked personalization of authority: “He became stronger than [ever] before, but also more alone and insecure” (Interview #27, November 23, 2020). This power-play, like those that came before them, reinforced the inter-communitarian violence and displacement regularly occurring across Western, Central and Southern Ethiopia, and prompted a growing number of European diplomats to begin questioning the fairytale they had bought into:

For a while we told ourselves that Abiy is just working with the tools he has ... But after Hacaaluu’s death I realized that three million people had been displaced. That pogroms were happening everywhere. And that it was always someone else’s fault, never that of the PM. (Interview #28, June 30, 2021)

The most devastating failure to foresee how resolute backing for one man due to ideological proclivities and Middle Eastern priorities of U.S. foreign policy would fragment Ethiopia came in the context of the very initiative that Abiy received his Nobel for: the Ethio-Eritrea rapprochement. Hailed initially as the breakthrough that would catalyze regional peace, by the summer of 2020 it was clear that the emergence of the axis between Issayas Afwerki and Abiy Ahmed was profoundly destabilizing to Ethiopia

and the broader Horn. The central problem was that the rapprochement was less a peace deal than a security pact designed to corral TPLF influence within Ethiopia and enable Abiy's consolidation of power. By introducing the TPLF's avowed external adversary into the center of Ethiopian politics, the PM undercut his own incentives to pursue dialogue, created a powerful veto player to any Ethiopia-wide political settlement, and entrenched the security dilemmas of the TPLF and his other opponents. In the words of one European special envoy "I was as wrong as everyone on Eritrea and Abiy's rapprochement. We failed to think regionally: that what looked like peace could actually increase insecurity for everyone" (Interview #18, July 6, 2021).

The volatile structural underpinnings of the Ethio-Eritrea rapprochement would eventually hasten a final confrontation with the TPLF (the "old guard" in Washington's reading of post-2018 Ethiopia) which began arming itself in its Tigray stronghold as Abiy and Issayas escalated their own military preparations, further locking in the security dilemma. Repeated calls for the international community to de-escalate the situation and constrain the bellicosity were ignored by the Trump Administration (International Crisis Group, 2020). Worse still, when fighting did erupt on November 3, 2020, the U.S. government tacitly endorsed the offensive by the Ethiopian government and its Eritrean allies: "We completely bought into the myth of the short war. That the conflict in Tigray would be over in no time, that the troops would be home before Christmas ..." (Interview #29, May 11, 2021). Public denials that U.S. officials had no forewarning of the conflict, only became aware of the massive involvement of Eritrean troops until weeks later and did not know what to make of reports of third-party aerial support for the war on Tigray are simply not credible and flatly contradicted by the interview material collected for this article. Aptly summarized by one of the UK's top diplomats:

Look: we could see the build-up of tensions and armaments for months. All the rhetoric, the militias parading, the muscle flexing in the Amhara region ... Some high-ranking U.S. officials clearly thought: sometimes you gotta do a clean-up job. Better have the Prime Minister do it quickly. (Interview #30, June 28, 2021)

Our conversations with interlocutors in Western intelligence and diplomatic services for this article underscored their conviction that the conflict with the TPLF could be finished in a matter of weeks, before Joe Biden would replace Donald Trump in the White House, and without much domestic or regional fallout.

One of the reasons for believing so was not just the sheer numbers of soldiers mobilized—federal Ethiopian troops, Amhara militias *and* the Eritrean army—to attack Tigray but also the drone strike force that Abiy's key

Middle Eastern backer, Abu Dhabi, made available. According to an Israeli official closely monitoring (and endorsing) the partnership: “The Emirates helped in a major way with the war [in Tigray]. That made a real difference” (Interview #31, May 24, 2021). The TPLF had no idea its enemies could rely on such capabilities; its artillery was decimated in the early weeks of the war. The United States and United Kingdom, and likely other European states too, knew full well what was happening:

The intervention was a personal favor from one leader to another. Some important people inside the Emirati government very much did not agree with the decision to support militarily and get involved in another messy conflict. But the Leader [Mohammed bin Zayed] took the decision. (Interview #32, June 21, 2021)

Only as the Tigray conflict dragged on and the displaced brought harrowing stories of atrocities to international news media did Washington begin its shift. Shortly after one particularly gruesome massacre in Axum perpetrated by Eritrean forces, strikes by UAE drones suddenly tapered off, upon external request (Interview #32, June 21, 2021). As the incoming Biden administration assessed the unfolding regional and humanitarian catastrophe, Washington decided to completely switch gears with the Ethiopian government. Noting the writing on the wall, the UAE publicly declared it was dismantling its military facility in Assab in February 2021. Contrary to Ethiopia’s, Abu Dhabi’s relationship with Washington remains strong.

Conclusion

For self-professed liberal hegemonies that eschew formal empire, alliances in key regions of the world are the linchpin of their vision of global order. However, these alliances have consistently been fraught, and often characterized by a routinized and institutionalized politics of enablement that has accelerated local crises and instability. Post-mortems of strained or even collapsing relationships usually highlight how dysfunctional principal-agent relations in U.S. foreign policy helped create conditions for (un)expected takeovers by local actors that then dissolve the partnership with the hegemon and take their state in a resolutely different geopolitical direction—post-1949 China or post-1979 Iran are paradigmatic, and indeed traumatic, cases.

The story of “Who Lost Ethiopia” carried somewhat different consequences from a U.S. foreign policy perspective. Although Washington’s policy errors could well lead to Ethiopia’s geopolitical realignment toward China, Russia, or other illiberal powers, the real costs to U.S. interests were in the domain of regional stability. A historic pillar of regional order in the Horn, Ethiopia’s implosion triggered a metastasizing humanitarian crisis of staggering magnitude that created chaos in corner of the African

continent critical to U.S. counter-terrorism equities and global maritime trade. Worse still, this did not happen because of American inaction, but was precisely facilitated by the manner in which U.S. policymakers sought to reinvent the partnership with Addis between 2018 and 2020.

The Ethiopian case is therefore also qualitatively different from other episodes of principal-agent crises because of *why* U.S. engagement missed the mark. It is here that the major conceptual upshot of this article rests. Rather than a reflection of deep historical continuities, Washington's unconditional embrace of Ethiopia's new Prime Minister represented a proactive break with the past—an effort to recast what was understood to be a dysfunctional alliance. As we demonstrated, Ethiopia as an imagined or real battleground in great power competition with China was one crucial aspect of Washington's strategic calculus, as was the belief that the Abiy's rise would strengthen the redrawing of regional order in the Middle East. Yet this move came with a hefty price tag: U.S. support was taken as a *de facto* *carte blanche* by the PM and his allies, inducing problems of moral hazard that undermined the stability of one of America's most prominent African anchors. While the U.S.-Ethiopia strategic partnership is for structural reasons likely to re-emerge at some point in the future, this article serves as a cautionary tale about how liberal hegemons can and should thoughtfully recalibrate difficult but vital regional alliances in a manner that reflects enduring interests in peace and human rights.

Finally, to the best of our knowledge, this article has developed the most extensive analysis of the international origins of the Ethiopian crisis so far attempted. On this score, the stakes are considerable. While most commentators have remained transfixed on the policy question of what external parties must do to end the carnage in Africa's second most populous state, they largely ignore the role of international players in the genesis of the country's current predicament. And without properly appreciating the unforced errors of Western—and especially U.S.—foreign policy that preceded the current crisis, international efforts to resolve it could very well repeat past failures. Ethiopia faces historic challenges, but its external partners must prioritize deploying their influence in a studiously impartial manner. To do otherwise, we have shown, is to court disaster.

Notes

1. “Popular discontent” refers to the emergence of large protest movements in Ethiopia's Oromo and Amhara regions.
2. Conditionality, pushback, and enforcing red lines vis-à-vis strategic partners can come in a variety of forms, and ultimately depends on the context. Withholding aid, reducing diplomatic engagement, or public critique are among several available tools.

3. By “constituencies,” we refer here to the complex of human rights, democracy promoting, and humanitarian NGOs that shape, and are shaped by, U.S. foreign policy.
4. Insights gleaned from several conversations with DFC officials and Congressional staffers, November–December 2020.
5. See (note 4).
6. Similar formulation by two diplomats who served at the U.S. embassy in Addis Ababa, as per conversations with them in June 2021 and September 2021.
7. The U.S. ambassador’s engagement with the Prime Minister’s Office was the critical mechanism through which these signals were transmitted, and in the context of emerging battles with political rivals “led him [Abiy] to take the relationship with the US for granted, and not worry about U.S. support” (Interview #21 November 27 2021).

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Interview #29, with a senior official in the U.S. Department of Defense, May 11, 2021.

Interview #30, with a senior official in the U.K. Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, June 28, 2021.

Interview #31, with a senior official in the government of the State of Israel, May 24, 2021.

Interview #32, with a senior official of the "Five Eyes" intelligence partnership between the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, June 21, 2021.

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